Success in Action:

Four Stories of Early Childhood Instructional Coaching

Gullnar Syed, Hannah Kelly,
Todd Grindal & Emma Terrell,
SRI Education

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Authors

Gullnar Syed
Hannah Kelly
Todd Grindal
Emma Terrell

SRI Education

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Implementing Systemwide Instructional Coaching

Despite what is often portrayed on TV and in movies, few people are born great teachers. Instead, effective teaching is a skill cultivated and refined through practice, knowledge, and support. It is increasingly clear that the old model of teacher professional development lectures or workshops are disconnected from classroom practice and do not translate into sustained improvements in teaching quality (e.g., O'Keefe, 2017; Schachter et al., 2019; Snyder et al., 2018; Zaslow et al., 2010). Effective instructional coaching, however, which builds on principles of self-direction, mentorship, and experiential learning (Knowles et al., 2005), has demonstrated positive impacts on teacher practices and student outcomes across dozens of rigorous research studies (Kraft et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2022).

Instructional coaching that promotes teacher agency is effective, but implementing it for early childhood teachers at scale is a challenge (Moreno et al., 2014; Neuman & Cunningham, 2009; Piasta et al., 2017, 2020). Hiring coaches with sufficient expertise, consistently applying a high-quality coaching model, finding time in busy schedules for teachers and coaches to meet, ensuring access to professional development resources—these have all limited the capacity of coaching to support large-scale improvement of the quality of young children's experiences in early care and education.[1]

Early care and education systems across the United States are tackling the challenge of providing effective coaching at scale. This report highlights four systems – three state systems and a charter network - that are actively engaging in leveraging instructional coaching to improve quality at scale. These systems differ in size, oversight, and the maturity of their efforts, as well as in their approaches to implementing large-scale coaching. While there is no one-size-fits-all model for effective coaching, the efforts of each of these systems offer important takeaways for other early care and education leaders who want to improve the quality of teaching in their programs. High-quality early care and education for young children is critical in

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[1] Throughout the case studies, we refer to early care and education programs as "early learning centers" or "centers" unless systems refer to them by a different name. In those cases, we refer to them by the name the systems use. We refer to staff at early learning centers as teachers.

fostering and nurturing environment where they can develop key cognitive, social-emotional, and academic skills (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). By leveraging effective instructional coaching, systems can significantly improve access to high-quality care for all young children.

We ground our examination of systems in the framework presented in *Reimagining Instructional Coaching* (RIC; Thomas et al., 2023). We focus on four of the five elements of the RIC framework (Content, User Experience, Usefulness, and Scaling). Through this lens, we examine the improvement efforts of the four systems, highlighting instances where they have effectively integrated elements of the RIC framework into their initiatives.

The experiences of these systems point to four key elements of successful scaling of system-level coaching initiatives:

1. Balance personalization and flexibility with consistent quality guidelines
2. Foster a culture of continuous quality improvement to the system by soliciting feedback
3. Have a strengths-based approach
4. Build teacher and coach agency to enhance engagement

In the following case studies, we explore various coaching initiatives that align with one or more goals of the RIC framework. While these examples do not encompass all initiatives or systems that incorporate these goals, they provide a compelling snapshot of how different systems are tackling the challenge of implementing high-quality instructional coaching at scale.

Case Study Methodology

When developing these case studies, we grounded our exploration in the RIC framework (Thomas et al., 2023). This framework focuses on observation tools for early childhood coaches and outlines goals, subgoals, criteria, and thresholds to guide current revision and future development (Exhibit A). Elements of the RIC framework ensure that the tools capture essential content, incorporate necessary psychometrics, facilitate quality experiences for coaches and teachers, and yield useful information for teacher improvement and scaling (see Appendix A for more details).

Exhibit A. The Reimagining Instructional Coaching Framework

Goal	Tools Are…
Content	Measuring quality in an equitable, culturally responsive manner.
Psychometrics[a]	Utilizing measures with sufficient validity and reliability to provide accurate feedback.
User Experience	Supporting teachers' engagement and agency in the observation process.
Usefulness	Providing actionable, easy-to-understand feedback.
Scaling	Expanding in an affordable, useful, and adaptable manner within data systems.

[a] *We do not focus on Psychometrics in these case studies because of ongoing development of measures in the systems we explore.*

Selection of Case Study Sites. We selected early care and education systems based on their alignment with the RIC framework goals, subgoals, criteria, and thresholds. We recruited four systems: three state agencies responsible for administration of state-funded preschool programs or early learning instructional coaching systems, and one early learning charter management/research organization. From each system, two to four individuals participated in interviews, for a total of 12 interviews. Participants held leadership roles at the state agencies or charter management/research organization.

Interview Protocol. Four researchers conducted semi-structured group or individual interviews with identified participants (see Appendix B for details). The purpose of these interviews was to explore successes, challenges, and key next steps in coaching practices as well as address two primary questions:

1. In what ways are systems innovating approaches to instructional coaching?
2. What unique strategies do these systems implement to coach at scale?

Analysis and Case Study Development. We transcribed the interviews and coded them using a series of debrief questions to highlight themes related to success, challenges, and elements of the RIC framework. Following the identification of themes, we created a set of case studies highlighting the structure of each system's instructional coaching. We shared the case studies with the participants for their review of accuracy.

System Stories

Below, we share the strategies employed by the four systems in alignment with the RIC framework. As a foundation for our exploration, Appendix X offers a high-level overview of each system's coaching initiatives, highlighting key partners, measures used, and the frequency of coaching cycles.

Alabama: Sustaining the Ripple Effect of Coaching

Adopting a reflective coaching model places teachers at the heart of the coaching process. Fostering a shared lens and language around observation and assessment, a cohesive system aligns efforts toward a common goal of improving outcomes for preschoolers.

RIC framework principles:

Usefulness: Coaches are teacher partners, rather than directors, in the goal-setting process to create lasting change. Coaches engage teachers in reflective questions to probe what they think is most important to implement to promote positive child outcomes.

Cultivating a shared language of quality across assessments and observations, along with establishing clear standards and curriculum, fosters cohesive and effective education systems. In Alabama, teachers and coaches align their efforts with early learning standards and observation tools to guide child outcomes, creating a unified framework that promotes high-quality education for preschoolers. This collaborative approach ensures that all players are working toward the common goal of enhancing learning experiences of preschool children throughout the state.

Strengths-Based Coaching with Teachers as Partners

The Office of School Readiness in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE), houses First Class Pre-K (FCPK), the state's voluntary preschool program with classrooms in a mixed-delivery system. FCPK has been highly ranked by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) since its founding, meeting 10 out of 10 NIEER Quality Benchmarks since 2006 (ADECE, 2024).

At its inception, all FCPK teachers were assigned a technical assistant, a role that blended activities of a monitor and coach. As monitors, these technical assistants completed activities such as overseeing program functioning, logistics, and spending. As coaches, they observed classrooms using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) tool. Scores from these measures directly guided coaching, where conversations with teachers focused on discussing the results of the assessment and creating plans to increase scores. This focus was more on "telling" teachers how to teach rather than actively involving them in the conversation; the approach did not recognize teacher expertise and agency. In 2013, after reflection from ADECE and a desire to shift toward practice-based and reflective coaching, the role was split into two—which, as one department

leader said, signaled the "birth of the role of coaching." Further refinements to student-centered coaching in 2020 and a revision of the Alabama Standards for Early Learning and Development (ASELDs) led to a 2023 "flip [of] the narrative … [which shifted]the mindset of creating goals based on teacher action [and] instead … on child outcomes."

Currently, curricula in FCPK classrooms are aligned with the ASELDs. These standards encompass eight domains of learning that fall under four categories: Relationships and Connections, Exploration and Critical Thinking, Communication, and Physical Development and Health. These metrics serve as planning tools for coaches and teachers, centering student outcomes as assessed through Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD) rather than targeting teacher practice. Leaders emphasize that positive change with children is the reason behind this student-centered focus. While other initiatives in the Alabama K–12 space utilize a student-centered coaching approach (Sweeney, 2011), coaches take learnings from the program to apply to this shift in goal-setting. As one ADECE leader puts it,

> **"Our focus isn't on creating goals about specifically a teacher's interaction. We look at the interactions to think about what can these things do for our kids. Let's create some goals for our children."**

To cultivate transparency and a deeper understanding, both teachers and coaches are trained on the observations and assessments that guide coaching (i.e., the Classroom Assessment Scoring System [CLASS] and TS GOLD). Teachers receive clear information about the purpose of the observation, supporting engagement of the teachers in both the direct child assessment requirement and the coaching cycle.

Using a Reflective, Iterative Coaching Process to Sustain Impacts

FCPK employs a tiered coaching model centered on CLASS domains and child assessment scores through TS GOLD, which offer a shared language to describe teacher practice. CLASS scores are used as a reflection tool throughout the coaching cycle. Rather than sharing numerical scores with teachers, coaches and teachers engage in reflective conversation. In this way, teachers are active participants in the coaching cycle, answering questions like "Why is this important to you?" and "What do you want to see happen in your classroom?" Focusing on inquiry rather than scores allows a shift away from deficit-based coaching, where low scores are perceived as a problem that needs to be fixed. While deficit-based coaching may seem more straightforward to implement, strengths-based coaching leads to what one department leader calls "lasting victories" by cultivating skills that are retained for years. As one ADECE leader shared,

> **"The score doesn't change a teacher, but the understanding where they're successful, and being able to use that success in another area, is what changes the teacher."**

For each classroom visit, coaches use Coaching Forms to track the purpose, plan, and teacher-coach reflective conversation that occurred with each teacher. These short, bulleted forms allow teachers and coaches to be aligned on coaching goals, creating a cycle of actionable feedback for each coaching visit. Teacher practices from CLASS observations are utilized as action steps to strengthen child outcomes. As an ADECE leader described,

"[coaching is like] dropping a rock in the pond. Eventually the ripples kind of fade out. If the pond is pretty big, you know, and we don't see the impact of them. So as the ripples keep going like, what pebble do we need to drop? And where do we need to drop it specifically so that ripple will keep going, not creating a new set of ripples. But how do we keep that ripple going until we get to the other side?"

Extending the Ripple

To find a way to sustain this ripple effect, the leader explained, the coaching experience needs to be cyclical and iterative. This approach involves a continuous process of setting specific goals, documenting progress, and recognizing achievements. The coaching cycle persists through ongoing documentation and experiences until a specific skill is gained or a particular goal is met. This iterative process ensures that the impact of coaching continues to ripple outward, creating lasting change in teacher practices and, ultimately, benefiting children. By maintaining this cyclical movement through documentation and reflection, coaches and teachers can work together to identify when they have successfully met their objectives, celebrating these milestones along the way.

Coaches extend this learning through occasionally harnessing technology to deepen the reflective practice. System leaders are exploring video coaching as an avenue for informal coaching; coaches videotape classrooms, which leaders hope will create "a great opportunity for conversation" with teachers. Systems leaders are also excited to continue partnering with Teachstone, the organization that delivers the CLASS tool, to provide an extension of this informal coaching into CLASS 2nd edition and provide an electronic method of data entry for coaches. This pilot work is ongoing, through the 2024-2025 academic year.

FCPK reaches all 67 counties statewide, an achievement made possible by the far reach and dedication of coaches. Coaches are integral during the scale-up; leaders emphasize that "coach agency is critical." By empowering coaches to set their own goals and action steps for professional development, the program extends the culture of continuous quality improvement. This autonomy not only enhances the effectiveness of coaching but also creates a positive ripple effect throughout the system, ultimately benefiting preschoolers across the state.

AppleTree: Scaling Quality Through Continuous Improvement

Maintaining a "North Star" for coaching across contexts, even if the star is nonspecific continuous improvement, can create cohesion within a system while allowing for adjustments to address contextual needs.

RIC framework principles:

User Experience: Coaches work with programs and teachers to share what to expect from observations. Coaches emphasize that observations are intended to support quality improvement and not meant to evaluate teachers.

Usefulness: AppleTree coaches employ easy-to-digest data dashboards that are available to teachers. Teachers can track their progress over time to monitor how their instruction improves in relation to coaching.

Scalability: Coaching tools are developed and used throughout the AppleTree system. Coaches use the same scope and sequence across AppleTree Schools and network schools, with flexibility to adapt based on program strengths, needs, and context.

Though it can be challenging, there is typically a path forward for improving instructional quality in a classroom. Across a school, coaches and leaders adapt different strategies based on the strengths and needs of different teachers. Across multiple schools in different states, with different schedules, priorities, and amounts of time to devote to improving instruction, solving the puzzle of scaling instructional quality becomes much more complex.

AppleTree Institute for Education Innovation operates public charter schools in the District of Columbia (DC) and also partners with schools across the country for use of its instructional model, Every Child Ready (ECR). The organization started as AppleTree Early Learning Public Charter School in 2005, serving 36 children in a church basement in DC. Today, AppleTree serves 1,100 students across 13 campuses and provides professional development to teachers in 11 states outside of DC. AppleTree's growth is, in part, attributable to the development and spread of the ECR instructional model. AppleTree Institute developed the ECR model and related coaching materials and conducts research relevant to the model. AppleTree Schools in DC use ECR and have dedicated instructional coaches. AppleTree Institute partners with schools in DC, Missouri, New York/Connecticut, and Texas for use of ECR, which includes professional learning and coaching resources. While many partners are charter schools, the model is adaptable to varying types of schools serving preschool students.

The ECR curriculum is play-based and comprehensive and includes units of study such as "Healthy Bodies, Healthy Minds." It also "subtly embeds" elements of CLASS into its 11 units (AppleTree Institute of Education Innovation, 2024). Alongside the curriculum, the Institute provides support in the form of contracted instructional coaches, which ECR partner schools using the curriculum can contract for any number of hours per month (from 4 hours to multiple days).

Scaling Through Multiple Local Partnerships

AppleTree's expansion beyond its own schools began with working other charter schools in the DC area to adopt the ECR curriculum and work with AppleTree coaches. When a former AppleTree school leader moved to New York, she proposed bringing the AppleTree coaching model with her to the new location and started as the first AppleTree partnership director working with programs in New York. From there, the ECR network has expanded to Texas, Missouri, and Connecticut. Partnership directors in each region are responsible for identifying potential adopters of ECR and AppleTree coaching.

Partnership directors reach out to adopters, who are typically charter schools launching an early learning program for the first time or looking to improve the quality of an existing program. Adopters may also reach out directly to partnership directors with their interest in using the ECR model. In some cases, the decision to launch an early learning program is tied to a desire to increase overall school enrollment; directors work with programs to make sure they understand the time, space, and expertise requirements of integrating an early learning classroom into their schools. In some cases, typically when the number of participating programs in a region is small, directors are responsible for coaching leaders and teachers in addition to their other responsibilities. In regions with a larger number of participating programs, directors find and hire a coach who provides coaching and professional learning services using the ECR professional learning program.

The professional learning scope and sequence follows the 11-unit ECR model and spans 4 coaching cycles, each lasting 9–12 weeks. The coaching focuses on two main goals in a cycle: one goal set collaboratively by the program leader and coach, and one based on program- and/or classroom-level data. As one AppleTree leader conveyed,

> **"The idea is that there's choice here … and there's agency at the school level with the coach for a leader to be like, no, actually … we only want to focus on CLASS. It's like, okay, well, you can focus on CLASS. But we focus on other things, too."**

School leaders and coaches work together to collaboratively identify goals for the early learning program across the ECR network of schools. Similarly, coaches work with teachers to identify their strengths and areas of need.

Refining and Adapting the Model to Local Context

This version of the professional learning program was developed and iterated on over 4 years of continuous improvement and feedback from coaches and teachers. As AppleTree has grown in its network and number of partners, it has had to shift its approach to make its professional learning more relevant across diverse contexts and classrooms:

> **"There used to be something that looked like there was just a lot less choice, because our team was smaller and we had fewer partners, and as the diversity of our teachers in terms of experience and needs really change, we had to broaden our menu."**

Coaches expressed wanting "more flexibility" to focus on centers' contextual needs, so the professional learning shifted to allow more flexibility (e.g., coaches and teachers can pick up the coaching sequence and start with any unit). At the same time, it focuses on guiding principles decided at the AppleTree Institute level:

> **"Looking across four different regions, we need to have some element of … what's the North Star that everyone is working towards. But we don't need … every school [to do] the exact same thing. Because I think one of our core beliefs is that coaching should be responsive, based on data and based on needs. And if we're too prescriptive and … making decisions before we look at data, it doesn't hit the mark … But we don't need something [where] every school does the exact same thing."**

As part of the coaching, teachers have access to a dashboard that shows observation percentages and scores for a classroom across time. They can track their trajectory over time in an easily digestible way, including viewing baseline quality and changes in quality after coaching sessions. Dashboards allow coaches to "pick out a discrete goal or action item to work on, and then really show concrete evidence of how progress is being made, or how a goal is being met."

Coaches typically develop personal relationships with teachers to understand their preferences when it comes to observation and coaching. They let teachers know what to expect in an observation—whether they will bring a computer into the classroom, what time they will show up and for how long, and what the follow up process looks like after the observation. Coaches "have a lot of frameworks [and] a lot of guidance. But there also ultimately is agency and autonomy over how exactly it's applied."

Managing the Growing Pains of Continuous Improvement

AppleTree's primary challenges have emerged from its expansion, balancing a dedicated culture of continuous improvement with the need to adapt its model to diverse program contexts. In some ECR partner schools receiving AppleTree coaching, there is not an established culture of using data to improve instruction. With limited coaching time in these settings, developing this data-driven orientation can be a gradual process.

AppleTree coaches prioritize responsiveness to contextual needs, carefully introducing new content as programs become ready. At the same time, regional directors spend time communicating the unique considerations of launching early learning programs with school leaders who may not be familiar with them.

A next step AppleTree is looking to tackle is greater teacher engagement and autonomy in coaching. Teacher feedback plays a large role in ECR coaching, although their voices may have more impact in AppleTree Schools in DC, which have dedicated coaches on-site multiple days each week (whereas partner schools may engage a coach for only 4 hours a month). One AppleTree leader suggested,

> **"There could be a little bit more emphasis on encouraging teachers to self-advocate, or just be a bigger presence within the [coaching] process. And again, because you're trying to maximize all of the time and opportunities you want to make, sometimes there's not a ton of time left for people to mull that over."**

As AppleTree continues to expand its reach, it prioritizes maintaining its strong culture of continuous improvement with a focus on balancing coach-led guidance and context specific needs.

Maine: Leveraging Local Coaches and Expertise

Systems can make funds available for organizations to apply for and serve as quality "conveners," receiving pass-through funds directed toward teacher training, coach salaries, and center support. This model allows local context to take a front seat as centers and coaches are identified by a local convener who knows the strengths and needs of centers in their area. At the same time, participation in the program allows communication, quality supports, and agency between the centers and the system.

RIC framework principles:

Usefulness: Observation data are housed in myTeachstone. Coaches make sense of the data and provide meaningful feedback for teachers.

Scalability: Maine's Office of Child and Family Services employs individuals trained in CLASS observations and leverages observers from Teachstone to conduct quality observations of programs.

Tailoring instructional quality supports can be a challenge when serving diverse early learning contexts. The state of Maine serves programs in urban and rural areas, programs with high quality ratings and those with low quality ratings, and a mix of early learning facilities and family care programs. For Maine, the answer to tailoring supports is to leverage local actors and expertise to "engage the unengaged and … support those that may not have that intrinsic motivation to move the dial on quality."

Maine's quality improvement system (QIS) involves many interest-holders. The Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS), within the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), oversees Rising Stars for ME, the state's QIS. Rising Stars for ME has two sets of standards based on whether an early learning center is a child care facility (13 or more children) or a family child care program (12 or fewer children). Centers, including staff and students, are assessed once or twice a year, and ratings determine what professional development is provided to the centers to maintain or potentially increase their ratings.

To administer the relevant professional development, OCFS partners with the University of Southern Maine, which houses the Maine Roads to Quality Professional Development Network (MRTQ PDN). This network staffs district coordinators who conduct on-site coaching, consultation, and technical assistance and leads communities of practice (CoPs) around the state. MRTQ PDN (n.d.) offers regional and topical CoPs, which typically meet every month, and collaborative partnerships CoPs, which "work with dedicated external partners towards a focused objective (for example: opening a new child care program)." These local partnerships and district coordinators provide tailored support to centers and teachers based on their context, strengths, and needs.

Piloting a Locally Tailored Coaching Model

In 2022, OCFS launched First4ME using Child Care and Development (CCDF) Quality Funds allocated to expand high-quality early care and education; OCFS is engaging the University of Maine in a third-party evaluation of the program (Maine DHHS, n.d.). A key piece of First4ME is regular instructional coaching, including formal CLASS observations and observations from local coaches. CLASS observations are conducted by either Teachstone or state-level employees. Local coaches are required to live within 1 hour of the programs and facilities so they can be regularly available. Feedback from the observations is shared with First4ME coaches and teachers through Teachstone's online platform.

Applicants for First4ME funding may include large child care facilities, chambers of commerce, YMCAs, and other nonprofit organizations. Applicants must identify programs and facilities they will work with as well as select local coaches to provide instructional support. The organizations can choose to work with programs and facilities of a certain quality rating (e.g., those with a 5-star rating or those with a 2- to 3-star rating); they can also choose to work primarily with family child care programs (12 or fewer children) or child care facilities (13 or more children). As an OCFS program manager put it,

> **"The why behind it [is] the size [and] scope in the State of Maine; we don't have resource and referral centers … and we don't have regionalization … What First4ME can provide is some intensive and intentional work around building a capacity with a network of child care providers, and it's convened by a nonprofit … It's really about having a backbone organization that can support those individual providers."**

Four pilot sites received the first round of First4ME funding: one in an urban center, two in larger towns, and one in a rural area. First4ME funding can support the purchase of high-quality materials and additional compensation for staff to engage in professional development or learn new platforms. In addition to First4ME fundings, all programs and facilities in the state can access additional funding to support teachers' growth based on a career lattice. The career lattice describes teachers' career progression and training; teachers may receive $200–$600 in additional pay each month and can move up the career lattice as they engage in more education and training. Programs and facilities have seen preliminary success in both the increased training and the retention of their teachers.

Addressing Challenges and Scaling

While OCFS staff report they are pleased with the success of First4ME so far, they acknowledge some challenges to address as the model moves forward. Although the program's supplemental payments and career lattice have helped improve retention, programs and facilities still experience turnover, which could mean coaches need to regularly shift priorities based on the strengths and needs of new teachers. Also, in some programs and facilities, observations and engagement in quality improvement are not typical practices, so teachers may perceive them as evaluative and anxiety-provoking. As an OCFS program manager related,

> **"We've had to slow down in one of the sites because we did have a staff member … say, 'This is too much. I don't want to do this, I can't.' "**

OCFS is working with program and facility leaders to improve communications around what it means to participate in First4ME and its associated coaching and observations.

First4ME is still in its pilot phase, and it does not yet have dedicated funding in legislation. OCFS wants to scale coaching through its multiple partnerships, including First4ME, but it depends on funding and the creation of systems that could support multiple programs/facilities and coaches across the state. Some next steps OCFS discussed for scaling include:

- **Further define the role of coaches:** Determine the types of training, policies, and infrastructure (length of coaching cycles, collection and documentation of data, etc.) that must be put into place to support a relationship-first model with teachers.

- **Identify foundational supports needed to engage programs and facilities in a structured instructional coaching model:** Create technical assistance and training to build program and facility leaders' and teachers' capacity to engage in the structured coaching.

- **Share data across the state to learn:** Spotlight some of the data and learnings from CLASS observations and share across agencies and offices to look at the bigger picture of all classrooms and programs being supported across the state.

- **Expand collaborative learning among coaches statewide:** Provide opportunities for coaches to learn from other coaches based on their personal areas of expertise.

- **Create a feedback loop to understand teacher experiences:** Establish community-level spaces where teachers and program/facility leaders can have conversations about what they want out of the First4ME program to support recruitment.

Washington: Using Video-Based Coaching to Drive Improvement

Systems can incorporate feedback from a variety of interest-holders, holding space for voices of end users. Continued improvements of the systems are just as important as continuous quality improvements in instruction.

RIC framework principles:

Content: Washington's Early Achievers employs individualized and personalized pathways to achieving continuous quality improvement, demonstrating a dedication to providing equitable and inclusive instruction.

User Experience: Washington empowers teachers. Video-based coaching allows for agency over observation timing and activity focus.

Usefulness: Transparent, strengths-based reports provide actionable, concrete feedback around which teachers and coaches engage.

Continuous quality improvement (CQI) serves as a cornerstone of any QIS. In Washington, the application of CQI pushes past common application, fostering a robust culture of continuous improvement within its QIS, Early Achievers. This initiative emphasizes incorporating feedback from all participants in iterative cycles, centering equity rather than equality in its continuous improvement efforts.

Washington's Early Achievers is a long-standing, robust QIS dating back to 2012, administered by the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF). Participation is voluntary for most licensed early learning centers, but mandatory for centers that serve children receiving subsidies from specialized funding streams of Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) and Seasonal Child Care. Before 2020, CLASS and the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) were used as formal observation and informal coaching tools. In late 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst, DCYF saw an opportunity to reimagine quality improvement and embark on a multiyear revision to the QIS. Incorporating virtual quality recognition and centering practitioner voices, the resulting system provides an equity-centered program with data to inform a 3-year continuous quality improvement cycle.

Gathering Feedback to Spark Reimagination

In fall 2020, DCYF and its partners at Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington and Child Care Aware of Washington began gathering feedback on Early Achievers from programs and teachers. Programs and teachers expressed significant concerns about the observation tools and coaching methodology used at the time. Teachers shared that unannounced visits did not give them a chance to showcase their quality and that the observation tools were not equitable. Teachers in alternative settings (such as programs using a Montessori approach) also said coaching tools did not meet their complex needs. One DCYF staff member recalled,

> **"One of the themes we heard was that things felt very high stakes. It was a very anxiety-provoking system. It felt very government-led, if you will, and not in the spirit of continuous quality improvement, although that's, of course, what everyone had aimed to build."**

Another important theme from the feedback was empowering teachers and making sure they felt supported throughout the process. Coaching previously happened at the program or center level rather than the teacher level. A DCYF staff member noted,

> **"We also looked at, you know, how can we empower [teachers] to drive this so that [it] doesn't feel like [a] gotcha moment, it feels like a more supportive quality improvement effort, which, of course, was the original aim of the system. And so by allowing this shift in video-based work rather than going on site unannounced, we were able to shift that power into [teachers'] and programs' hands so that they could choose the elements they wanted to share."**

Shifting to Video for Teacher Empowerment and Agency

In response to this kind of feedback, DCYF and its partners at Cultivate Learning and Child Care Aware of Washington worked collaboratively to shift its Early Achievers model. They developed a new approach that allows teachers to submit videos rather than have classroom visits, which were often unannounced and perceived as not truly representing quality. Cohorts of programs began piloting elements of the new program in 2022 (Washington State DCYF, 2022). First, programs complete a "Program Profile" based on interviews with teachers, program leaders, and families to "tell the story" of their program. This report is available for coaches and directors to review and functions as a strengths-based tool to inform the quality improvement plan.

The first look into the classroom occurs through teacher-submitted "Video Highlights." Teachers submit one 10- to 15-minute video of classroom instruction highlighting their chosen lesson or activity along with an associated reflection on their teaching practice. Teachers can submit this video in a language of their choosing, as a diverse team of translators is available to support reflection. Videos are submitted from every classroom, whereas the previous system had sampled a selection of classrooms rather than assessing quality in each classroom.

These videos are then coded by a small team at Cultivate Learning using a video rubric called the Quality Interactions and Childcare Tool (QUIC Tool). Coaches through Child Care Aware of Washington then use these reports to guide teacher and program coaching, conducted virtually through the Coach and Educator Community Interface (CECi). Using this virtual platform, coaches personalize teachers' professional development around the QUIC Tool reports in a strengths-based lens.

Reports generated from the QUIC Tool have been positively received by coaches and teachers alike. While the reports are strengths-based in nature, coaches also like the easily readable, usable, and digestible format that provides "tangible, specific, and concrete ideas" to support quality improvement. The transparency of reports also draws users in. As one interview participant put it,

> **"There's no black box of what happened. There's no memory recall of what was observed. It's there for everyone to see."**

Iterating Based on Community Context to Center Equity and Agency

To develop the QUIC Tool, Cultivate Learning carefully considered community contexts in collaboration with interest-holder workgroups. DCYF leaders employed Liberatory Design (Anaissie et al., 2021) to center equity in their validation work, utilizing the Delphi method of anonymous rounds of feedback to build consensus. This rigorous method provided them with "incredible feedback … to iterate the tool." Leaders also placed high importance on retaining an equitable tool, stating that past revisions contained "some indicators and tools [that] don't quite work for various communities." For sovereign nations within Washington, state leaders have engaged with the Aboriginal Head Start Association of British Columbia to bring an alternative assessment option, the LOVIT Way Program Evaluation Process (Washington State DCYF, 2024). The LOVIT Way is a dedicated program focused on engaging Indigenous communities, teachers, and learners. At the time of interview, one program had adopted the LOVIT Way as an alternative to Video Highlights and the QUIC Tool.

Within the revised systems, pathways to gain points are multipronged, giving continued agency to program leaders and teachers. Level 1 is achieved through licensure; Level 2 achievement begins with the Program Profile. Level 3 is achieved after completion of two rounds of Video Highlights; programs are encouraged to engage in coaching cycles before and between each Video Highlight. To achieve Level 4 or 5, programs have the option to submit additional video highlights, complete professional development, submit accreditation, or engage in a program records review that assesses additional quality indicators such as child screening and expulsion prevention.

While there are many coaching efforts across the state in different settings, leaders have focused on ensuring funding is allocated in a consistent manner that is appropriate to the program. Validation of the program is ongoing, set to finish at the close of 2024. DCYF's goal? "To really build true continuous quality improvement."

Takeaways from the Four Systems

Early learning systems across the landscape of publicly funded preschool are focused on maintaining high standards of quality. However, scaling instructional quality within and across systems presents significant challenges. When aligned with learnings from the RIC framework, innovative approaches support early learning environments for teachers, children, and coaches alike.

First, successful system-level implementation of instructional coaching requires striking a balance between consistent quality standards and flexibility for local needs. Crafting personalized coaching solutions that respect the diversity of early learning environments at the local and community level are key for teacher engagement and participation, as exemplified by Washington's use of alternative assessment and AppleTree's flexible professional learning sequence. Utilizing local coaches builds important coach-teacher relationships in Maine, addressing the challenge of teacher buy-in.

Similarly, actively seeking and incorporating feedback from key interest-holders—such as teachers, coaches, center leads, and families—can enhance the effectiveness of systems. Washington exemplifies this approach by continuously refining tools based on input from those directly involved in the system as well as external content experts. This iterative process ensures solutions are sensitive to the diverse cultures, languages, and identities present among teachers and children.

To further enhance engagement, building on teacher assets can facilitate actionable feedback that strengthens instruction. Instructional coaching is most effective when coaches take a personalized approach by providing feedback and engaging in goal-setting based on an individual teacher's needs. As part of that process, the coach should also acknowledge the breadth of knowledge and experience teachers bring to the classroom (Moreno et al., 2014; Weber-Mayrer et al., 2015). All four systems incorporate feedback cycles from observations, first analyzing the data before presenting it in a way that is meaningful for teachers. In Washington, strengths-based reports generated from video coaching are clear and accessible tools that promote quality improvements. AppleTree coaches use data dashboards to present evidence of growth and guide coaching conversations while emphasizing to teachers that observations are tools for support rather than evaluation. Meanwhile, Alabama's reflective coaching model prioritizes a strengths-first approach, allowing teachers to focus on actionable feedbacks rather than prioritizing numbers.

Research suggests that teacher-coach relationships must be founded on mutual respect, open communication, and empowering teachers in the roles (Johnston & Brinamen, 2012; Knoche et al., 2013). **However, coach empowerment and engagement are also key for scaling efforts.** Identifying and recruiting skilled coaches is just the beginning; ongoing professional development and opportunities for coaches to learn from one another are essential components of their success. Leaders from both AppleTree and Maine expressed a strong commitment to enhancing collaboration among coaches throughout their network or state. Alabama's leaders also emphasized the importance of coach agency as a fundamental element for scaling effective practices. This perspective aligns with findings from Blazar et al. (2024), who assert that providing support and retaining high-quality coaches significantly enhances instructional quality.

As demonstrated by the significant revisions to QIS occurring across 17 states in the past year, the landscape of instructional coaching is rapidly evolving (The Build Initiative & Child Trends, 2024). While the four systems highlighted in this report provide valuable insights into effective practices aligned with the RIC framework, they represent just a sample of the broader movement toward innovation in instructional coaching. By sharing these key examples, we hope to provide leaders with strategies to use to in their own efforts to enhance instructional coaching. Together, we can foster environments that prioritize collaboration, support, and continuous improvement, ultimately benefiting teachers and the children they serve.

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Appendix A. Reimagining Instructional Coaching (RIC) Framework Goals

The *Reimagining Instructional Coaching* (RIC) framework details the ideal features of observation tool and tool usage to support instructional coaching in early learning (Thomas et al. 2023). The goals, subgoals, criteria, and thresholds are centered on perspectives and experiences of diverse teachers, families, and learners.

- **Goal 1, Content**, focuses on to what extent observation tools are measuring quality in an equitable manner for diverse learners and diverse settings. Equitable measurement tools take into account children's individual needs incorporating a child's cultural strengths and identity.

- **Goal 2, Psychometrics,** states that tools measure what they say they will measure and retain sufficient levels of reliability and validity.

- **Goal 3, User Experience,** pertains to implementation of tools in a supportive and equitable manner for both teachers and children being observed. Tools and measures can be used across multiple delivery settings and teachers are informed on what, where, and when the tool will be implemented.

- **Goal 4, Usefulness,** states that resulting reports and information from tools provide digestible and actionable feedback for both teachers and program leaders. Findings actively support quality improvement efforts.

- **Goal 5, Scalability,** relates to not only application of a measurement tool across a larger system, but also affordability and data interoperability within a system. Tools are not overly burdensome, expensive, or time-consuming to prepare for. Data are securely stored, and data are seamlessly integrated into existing platforms.

Appendix B. System Interview Protocol

Overview

1. What prompted the team to initiate this effort, and when did it begin?

2. What types of challenges did you encounter during implementation?

3. What do you see as successes of your implementation?

4. Tell us about how your system leverages classroom observation data to support instruction.

5. What do you see as key next steps?

6. Are there any changes you would make to your current approach? Things you would keep the same?

7. Are you thinking about ways to spread or disseminate this effort to others in the early education space?

Goal 1: Content

1. When it comes to observations, could you share with us any types of variations or personalization for diverse learners with regards to varied linguistic, demographic or socioeconomic backgrounds? What about children with disabilities?

2. How are families asked to engaged in children's learning at school or in the home?

Goal 3: User Experience

1. Who makes decisions around which observation tools are used?

2. Can you describe the general logistics around observations?

3. What have you heard from teachers around the observation process?

Goal 4: Usefulness

1. Who gets feedback from observations? Do program staff and coaches receive reports first, or are they communicated directly with teachers?

2. How do teachers typically implement feedback from the tool?

Goal 5: Scalability

1. Tell us more about the data platforms that are used.

2. How burdensome is the observation process (including training on the tool, observation, scoring, and summarizing results)?

3. Can you estimate the amount of time it takes for each person involved in the observation to engage with the tool and process?

Appendix C. Overview of Coaching in the Four Systems

System	When the Initiative Began	Number of Classrooms, Students, and/or Teachers	Key Partners and Players	Coaching Tools Used[a]	Cadence of Quality Improvement Cycles	Data Platforms Utilized by Coaches and Teachers
Alabama (First Class Pre-K)	2000 (beginning of instructional coaching initiative) 2013 (shift to reflective coaching) 2023 (shift to student-centered coaching)	1,248 classrooms	Alabama Department of Human Resources; Office of School Readiness in the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education (ADECE); Alabama Quality STARS; Alabama State Department of Education; Alabama Head Start State Collaboration Office	CLASS[b]	Sites receive annual reviews by STARS Specialists. Reviews include a documentation review and/or observations, depending on the STAR quality rating of the site. Not all First Class PreK classrooms participate in Quality STARS.	The ECE data platform stores descriptive data from classrooms, CLASS scores, and coach visit forms (goals/action steps, summary of the visit). myTeachstone is used to document observations over time. Coaches have access to teacher scores and data at a large scale, while teachers receive feedback rather than observation scores.
AppleTree (Every Child Ready)	2005	3,500 students (includes both AppleTree Charter Schools and Every Child Ready Network)	AppleTree Institute and AppleTree Schools	AppleTree utilizes several observation tools created internally in addition to the CLASS tool.	AppleTree Schools engage in 4 coaching cycles a school year, each lasting 9–12 weeks.	Teachers and coaches access an online coaching dashboard where they can track teacher progress over time. Coaches can see overall school and district trends, and teachers have access to individual scores.
Maine (First4ME)	2022 (First4ME funding allocated)	576 children from 11 providers statewide	Maine Department of Health and Human Services; Office of Child and Family Services (OCFS); Maine Roads to Quality (MRTQ) Professional Development Network at University of Southern Maine	CLASS	MRTQ conducts annual quality improvement cycles, where sites are assessed 1 to 2 times a school year, based on the sites' quality rating. The frequency of assessments increases as a site progresses to a higher quality level.	The myTeachstone online platform is used to document observations over time. OCFS, program leaders, and coaches have access to this data at a large scale, while teachers can access individual scores.

System	When the Initiative Began	Number of Classrooms, Students, and/or Teachers	Key Partners and Players	Coaching Tools Used[a]	Cadence of Quality Improvement Cycles	Data Platforms Utilized by Coaches and Teachers
Washington (Early Achievers)	2020 (QUIC Tool development and subsequent launch)	3,410 family child care programs and child care facilities	Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF); Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington; Child Care Aware of Washington	DCYF and community-developed measure called the Quality Interactions and Childcare Tool (QUIC Tool); LOVIT Way, an alternative measure to the QUIC Tool dedicated to engaging the state's Indigenous communities	3-year quality recognition cycle where sites can earn recognition points over time and achieve higher quality levels. To foster ongoing growth, touch points between coaches and teachers become more frequent as sites progress through the quality levels.	MERIT is an online system used to record and recognize the growth of sites statewide—most notably, this is used to keep track of earned points during a recognition cycle and view sites' quality levels. Coach and Educator Community Interface (CECi) is a virtual quality recognition and coaching tool for teachers to receive virtual coaching, access online professional development resources, and upload classroom observations

Note. *All information in the table without a linked source came from interviews with individuals who work for the key partners and players identified in the table.*

[a] Coaching tools are inclusive of classroom observation tools and do not include child assessments.

[b] Additional child assessments are used to inform coaching: Teaching Strategies GOLD; PPVT (Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test); ASQ-3 (Ages and Stages Questionnaires); and DECA (Devereaux Early Childhood Assessment

Thank you!

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Silicon Valley
(SRI Headquarters)
333 Ravenswood Avenue
Menlo Park, CA 94025
+1.650.859.2000
education@sri.com

Washington, DC
1100 Wilson Boulevard
Suite 2700
Arlington, VA 22209
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